REFUGEE WOMEN: IN THE SPIRIT OF SURVIVAL

''Lien is 22 and from South-East Asia. Over two years ago she boarded a flimsy fishing boat with 79 other people and put to sea for a nearby country. The reserves of food and water were soon exhausted and after 10 days at sea the boat ran out of fuel. Their cries for assistance went unheeded by passing ships. The boat was attacked twice by pirates. On the first occasion, the refugees were stripped of valuables and possessions. On the second, Lien was one of several young women taken on board the pirates' boat and repeatedly raped. After a total of 27 days at sea, the refugees were finally rescued by a passing ship and disembarked at the nearest port. Lien is still in a transit camp, awaiting acceptance by a Western country.'' (''UNHCR and Refugee Women'', 1985.)

Lien is one of the world's more than 15 million refugees—a number nearly equal to the entire population of Australia. They live in almost 100 countries. Many have been refugees for several years.

REFUGEES: AN OVERVIEW

A refugee is defined by the 1951 International Convention relating to the Status of Refugees as a ''person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality''. This definition does not include persons who leave for economic reasons, or persons who are victims of natural disasters.

Afghan refugees in South-West Asia constitute the world's largest group. There are some 3.2 million in Pakistan and a further 2.8 million in Iran, according to government figures.

Palestinians constitute the second largest group. They number 2.3 million, living in various parts of the Middle East.

Africa has 4.6 million refugees. Among them, 1.3 million are from Ethiopia, 1.1 million from Mozambique, and hundreds of thousands from Angola, Somalia and the Sudan.

Half a million people have fled Iraq in the past few years. Their ranks have swollen with the Gulf war, and it is estimated that the number of people fleeing Iraq and Kuwait could reach 1.5 million.

IN SEARCH OF SECURITY

Of the some 15 million refugees world-wide, at least 75 per cent are women and children. In some countries women and children constitute 90 per cent of the refugees.

In many circumstances, both men and women refugees experience the same difficulties. But there are situations in which refugee women face special problems and are even more at risk, simply because they are women.

One of the gravest hazards is the violation of their physical safety. While both men and women refugees are victims of atrocities, the problems of refugee women during flight are particularly acute. They have often been attacked, raped or killed by soldiers, rebels, border guards and others with whom they came in contact.

A graphic illustration is presented by the many cases of pirate attacks on the high seas against asylum seekers. In the last few years, an estimated 2,400 women have been physically attacked by pirates in the South China Sea and some 1,000 abducted.

WHO'S HELPING THE REFUGEES?

Governments, especially those of the host country, take responsibility in the first instance for refugees. In addition, various organizations work to assist them. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the only organization mandated by the international community to protect refugees world-wide. It does so by providing legal protection, and by furnishing food, shelter, medical aid, education and training. It also

seeks durable solutions to their problems—voluntary repatriation, integration in their country of asylum or resettlement in a third country. Twice awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, UNHCR celebrates its fortieth anniversary in 1991.

Two United Nations operations assist specific groups. Set up in 1949, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provides health, education, relief and social services to the 2.3 million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The UN Border Relief Operation, set up in 1982, assists some 300,000 Cambodians living along the Thai-Cambodian border.

Other organizations which co-operate in assistance activities include the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development Programme, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organization and—outside the United Nations system—the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Organization for Migration. Host country Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play an important role.

Such agencies help refugees make a difficult transition, which involves geographic, ethnic and cultural displacement, all adding to the trauma of forced departure.

CARETAKERS AND PROVIDERS

Even after women have secured international protection for themselves and their dependants, they often face additional responsibilities for having become the head of the household. Their husbands may still be fighting, may have been killed, or may work far away. Millions of refugee families are headed by women.

Health is a top priority in all refugee settlements. Because women are the prime providers of health care to other family members, their access to health care services is the key to the welfare of the entire community.

The family's health is related to a woman's knowledge on how to promote a healthy environment and how to take preventive action against disease. Many women are midwives or practitioners of traditional medicine, and can easily become community health workers. Thus, many health care and education programmes for refugees focus on women.

For instance, UNRWA places a strong emphasis on mother and child health care, providing health education classes for women at its 105 maternal and child care centres.

Employment is another priority. Refugee women, especially heads of household, need an income to support their families. But more than 80 per cent of the world's refugees live in developing countries, often in those countries most severely affected by economic problems. For most refugees, full employment is an unattainable dream.

Wherever possible, agencies such as UNHCR, set up programmes fostering self-help and encouraging economic self-sufficiency. To this end, UNHCR supports vocational training and income-generating programmes in many countries hosting refugees, such as Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Malawi, Pakistan and Thailand.

Programmes for Afghan women have proved particularly successful. In the largest UNHCR programme, more than 30,000 Afghan refugee women in Pakistan have generated much-needed income by producing quilts, school uniforms, bags, carpets and other handicrafts, and some of the projects are now breaking even. In Iran, over 6,000 Afghan refugee women are engaged in carpet-weaving. The products are marketed through government outlets, and the project has proved economically viable.

In the main asylum countries of Africa, such as Ethiopia, Malawi, Somalia, the Sudan and Zambia, women are given land and farm implements and encouraged to become self-reliant.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Education is another priority. The proportion of refugee women and girls participating in educa-

tion programmes varies greatly. In 1987, refugee women and girls in one African country represented 44 per cent of all refugee students receiving primary education. The number of refugee girls and boys enrolled in primary school in refugee camps in one Central American country was almost equal.

In South-East Asia, several voluntary agencies provide primary education, with a very high attendance by refugee students, evenly distributed between girls and boys. On the other hand, Afghan refugee girls in the largest UNHCR education programme account for only 10 per cent of the primary school students.

In secondary education, in 1988 women represented only 29 per cent of the total refugee students assisted world-wide by UNHCR. In Latin America, women constituted 44 per cent of the refugee students, while in Africa they constituted only 26 per cent.

UNRWA, the UN agency assisting Palestine refugees, has an excellent track record. The Agency allocates to education about half its total annual budget of about $250 million. Girls aged 6-14 attend UNRWA elementary and preparatory schools. Schoolgirls represent the same percentage—49 per cent—as girls in the 6-14 age group in the Palestine refugee population.

Eight UNRWA centres provide vocational and technical training. In 1988-89, women represented 20 per cent of the trainees. In the three centres training teachers, women constituted 60 per cent of the students. Women were also awarded one third of the UNRWA university scholarships in 1988-89.

THE NEED FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Since women and their children represent the vast majority of refugees, programmes can be effective only if they are planned in consultation with them and with an understanding of their needs.

But too often women are not included when decisions are made that affect the future of refugees, even though they are in most cases the linchpin of their community's economic and social life. The same is true for decisions on the management of refugee programmes.

There are, however, examples of participation. In a settlement in Zaire, the camp population has elected female co-ordinators. They attend the meetings of the settlement leadership, participate in the distribution of assistance items, and are responsible for the care of pregnant women, the vaccination of children and basic health education.

The Khmer Women's Association (KWA) promotes women's participation in the camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. KWA leaders take part in the discussions on issues affecting the camps' women and children. The KWA employs social workers, teachers for literacy and skill classes, and staffers for day-care centres.

Assistance agencies are coming to acknowledge the importance of women's input. UNHCR has developed a policy that seeks to integrate the needs and resources of refugee women in all aspects of its assistance. The policy promotes the participation of refugee women in the planning and implementation of projects. Women are considered not only as vulnerable people in need of assistance, but also as a resource for the development of their community.

RAISING AWARENESS OF WOMEN AS REFUGEES

The United Nations has greatly contributed to raising the issue of refugee women. The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, adopted in 1985 at the end of the UN Decade for Women, highlighted the situation of refugee women as an area of special concern.

''Refugees and displaced women and children'' is a priority theme for the UN Commission on the Status of Women, meeting at Vienna from 27 February to 8 March 1991. To prepare for the meeting, UNHCR, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) organized a meeting of experts on that theme in July 1990 in Vienna.

UNHCR has paid special attention to women. In the last three years, the Agency has set up a committee on refugee women, issued guidelines for their international protection, and created the position of senior co-ordinator for refugee women.

NGOs have been equally involved. Several groups have formed to examine policies in their own country or to focus on international protection and assistance. In 1986, various NGOs set up the International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women to share information and to act as an advocate with Governments and assistance agencies. The Working Group convened an International Consultation on Refugee Women in Geneva in 1988, which made recommendations on issues such as protection, health, education and employment.

A KEY RESOURCE

Said a Chilean woman resettled in Argentina, "The woman in exile has the function of getting the family ahead, to be the most strong . . . We have two options: either you become stronger or you break. And in general you become stronger."

Women refugees in the most desperate situations have demonstrated exceptional strength and resilience. Fathers are often incapable of assuming sole responsibility for the family, but families headed by women have a remarkable capacity to survive.

Women themselves are sometimes surprised at their resourcefulness. "I never realized how strong I am," said a woman refugee now resettled in Canada. "I always thought I was dependent on others. Now I know I can manage on my own. I feel strong deep inside. I want to encourage other women refugees to know that they can find confidence and hope."

UNHCR itself is now for the first time headed by a woman. In December 1990, Sadako Ogata, of Japan, was elected UN High Commissioner for Refugees by the UN General Assembly. A diplomat and university professor, Ogata was Japan's first woman ambassador. She has been Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Studies at Sophia University in Tokyo, and Japan's representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights. The new High Commissioner took up her duties on 18 February 1991.

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